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AUTHOR Osburne, Andrea G.
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ABSTRACT

A survey of master's level English language teacher trainees in a Chinese university examined prevailing attitudes toward a methodology course and compared them to previous findings. Students were asked to rate course quality and the quantity of various course materials and tasks. The results showed an overall positive reaction to the course, with the exception that students were disappointed with what they perceived to be a lack of teacher availability. It is concluded that (1) negative perceptions of teacher availability were primarily due to student attitudes about the use of teacher office hours, and (2) negative student attitudes at the outset of the course improved during the course, suggesting that it is possible to give a successful methods course in China. (MSE)

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Chinese Students and Methodology Courses

Andrea G. Osburne

Central Connecticut State University

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Much has been made in recent literature of Chinese English teachers' negative response to courses in teaching methodology. Foreign teacher trainers in the P.R.C. have noted the continuing interest among teachers in literature rather than in methodology and linguistics, and also the primacy attributed to upgrading teachers' English language skills in teacher training programs (Cowan 1979, Patrie and Daum 1980, Mahon and Grabe 1982, Scovel 1983, Maley 1983, Oatey 1984). Grabe and Mahon (1981), attempting to explain the reluctance to study teaching methodology, cite such factors as the traditional nature of China's educational system, the fear of teachers that use of new methods would not serve the examination preparation needs of their students, individual teachers' limited influence on educational policies in terms of methods selected for actual use in the classroom, and the preference which teachers consider their students to have for traditional methods. Yet Oatey (1984) points out that attitudes in China towards methodology may be changing, and within this context it is worthwhile to reexamine the issue. The experience reported here involved graduate students enrolled in two sections of a Master's level course in methodology in 1986 (part of a program sponsored by Queens College, CUNY at Hunan University).

The course at Hunan followed a fairly standard design; there were units on teaching methods, the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, culture, testing,

lesson plans, and ESP. The textbook, Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979), was supplemented by approximately fifteen journal articles. Students took three examinations and wrote four lesson plans, with a fifth one optional; the examinations were identical in format to those I have used in the U.S., and one, which required analysis of a method to which students had not previously been exposed, was identical in content as well. At the end of the course, the students were asked to fill out an anonymous course evaluation form.

The form which the Chinese students were asked to complete contained twelve questions which were to be answered on a scale of 1 to 5, with each numeric value being defined for each question. These items were divided into two types. Items of the first type (questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12) related to course quality, and in these a rating of 5 on an interval scale represented the most favorable response, with 1 representing the least favorable. Items of the second type (questions 2, 3, and 8) related to the quantity of various course paraphernalia such as examinations and other assignments, and in these, a rating of 3 on a nominal scale represented the most favorable response ("just right"), with 1 and 5 representing the least favorable ("too few" or "too many"). The questions, along with a summary of the responses, appear in Table 1. As shown, the overall reaction of the students to the course in methodology can

be seen as quite favorable, except in the case of question 11, which will be discussed below. It should be recalled that this survey was conducted at the conclusion of the course. Had students been surveyed at the start for their opinions about taking a methodology course, the results could have been quite different; the first week, I was the recipient of complaints identical to those that have been widely reported by others: requests to teach language skills only, threats that attendance would gradually dwindle, and so on. Perhaps the negative response so widely reported is based on premature sampling. It would not be surprising to find that Chinese students, like others, require some time and persuasion to appreciate the value of a new concept.

As far as the negative response to question 11 is concerned, I believe that it reflects Chinese students' different assumptions about the appropriate availability of instructors. During the course, four office hours for consultation were provided weekly (most American graduate students would probably consider this amount of office hours reasonable). Other American instructors teaching these students complained that the students rarely made use of their office hours, but rather came to see them at home at all hours. Insisting that office hours be used for the methodology course did result in students actually making

use of them. However, the perceived inconvenience was apparently regarded unfavorably by the students.

The above analysis indicates that Oatey's assertion that attitudes in China towards courses in teaching methodology may be changing is not overly optimistic. Foreign instructors going to China to teach can expect that even if students' initial response appears to be negative, it should be possible to give them a standard methodology course successfully.

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Table 1

(Sample size: 44; Degree of Freedom: 43)

Question	Mean Score	Calc. t Value
1. The objective of this course has been to acquaint you with basic language teaching skills. To what extent do you feel it has been successful in this regard?	3.86	7.815
4. Were lectures and discussions helpful?	4.14	9.452
5. Were handouts helpful?	4.41	12.306
6. Were the exams fairly designed to give to give you an opportunity to demonstrate your grasp of course material?	3.95	6.850
7. Were the exams fairly graded?	3.82	6.475
9. Did the instructor seem knowledgeable and interested in the material?	4.57	19.649
10. Did the professor cover the subject matter of the course sufficiently?	3.95	9.695
11. Did you have enough opportunities in this course to ask questions and confer with the professor?	2.57	- 4.600
12. In general, was your experience in this course positive or negative?	4.05	7.571

Critical t value: 2.704

Conclusion: Null hypothesis that response is neutral is rejected at .01 level of significance.

Question	Percentage of most favorable response	Calc. Chi Square
2. Were reading assignments acceptable?	79.5	98.954
3. Were special projects like writing lesson plans acceptable?	81.8	107.818
8. Were there enough (or too many) exams?	68.1	73.045